

Sermon for Bible Sunday

A sermon preached by the *Revd. Dr Ernest Nicholson* at St Peter's, Wolvercote on Sunday 23rd October 2011

We often refer to the Bible as the 'book of books', and so it is, probably the most influential collection of literature in the world's history. But you know that it is also quite literally a book of books, Old Testament containing 39 of them, and the New Testament 27. The Greek word from which we derive our word Bible is *ta biblia*, literally 'the books'. They were composed over an extensive period of time: what is probably the earliest composition in the Old Testament, the Song of Deborah in Judges 5, may date from the 12th century BC, that is, four to five centuries earlier than Homer; and the latest is the book of Daniel from the second century, making a total span of 1000 years. And when we add the books of the New Testament, which are virtually all compositions of the first Christian century, we extend this to as much as twelve hundred years: that's near enough to twice as long as the entire span of the writing of English literature, from Chaucer to the present day. You will be aware also, of course, that the books of the Bible are of many different genres: there is law, prophecy, historical narrative, proverbs of the wise, the psalms; there is literature of a sceptical nature, most notably the book of Job with its struggle with the problem of the suffering of the innocent, and the book of Ecclesiastes, with its doleful theme 'all is vanity'; there are the gospels, a genre possibly adopted and adapted from Roman or Greek narratives about singular individuals; and there is the letter, the epistle, adopted first by St Paul and then by others as a means of expressing and transmitting the Christian message; there is apocalyptic literature such as Revelation centring upon the last things and the end of time.

We refer to this large collection of books as the Christian canon, a Greek word meaning 'list', in this case a list of books bearing authority. And we commonly refer to this collection as 'the word of God', 'the word of the Lord', and it is about this that I wish to share with you some thoughts, especially since I know that there are some among you who, like myself, feel a degree of discomfiture about a too ready use of the liturgical declaration 'this is the word of the Lord' that follows a reading from Scripture in church and which we declared a few moments ago.

Here's an example that is often cited from the story in Numbers 15 of the man caught gathering sticks on the Sabbath. Until quite recently it was prescribed by the Lectionary for the third Sunday before Lent. It concludes thus (vv. 35-6):

'And the Lord said to Moses, "The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp." And all the congregation brought him outside the camp, and stoned him to death with stones, as the Lord commanded Moses'.

This is the sort of reading which, when capped by the declaration 'This is the word of the Lord' provokes an indignant, not to say angry, reaction. And of course this passage does not stand alone. And sometimes this very uncomfortable feeling expresses itself in a desire to abandon altogether reading the Old Testament in church, as though its contents and character are epitomised by such a passage. Nor does the New Testament entirely escape; we have all heard understandable mutterings of annoyance when we are invited to declare 'this is the word of the Lord' following a reading ordering the subordinate status and role of women in the church.

A discriminating choice of readings which omits such passages from the Lectionary has been the answer to such frustrations, and as a practical measure this has been widely accepted. I don't think any of us wants to reintroduce, for example, those raging curses which find expression in some Psalms, and I don't imagine that we would find very appealing a Lectionary that subjected us to weeks on end of readings from the book of Judges. But selectivity is just an evasion of a more fundamental problem. It sidesteps the offensive texts, but leaves the thoughtful reader or listener wondering about many passages which, though not offensive, are scarcely inspiring. A ready example is the story of Paul's shipwreck in Acts 27:

‘So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea, at the same time loosening the ropes that tied the rudders; then hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach’?

Why we should cap this text with the declaration ‘this is the word of the Lord’ quite eludes me and, I suspect, you also!

The source of ‘word of God’ language is the prophetic declaration, known from such texts as ‘The word of the Lord that came to Hosea...’ and other prophetic books. This in the face of the fact, however, that much of the Bible is manifestly not prophetic in either origin or literary form or content. And that's why I have mentioned the very diverse types or genres of literature and books that make up the Bible. What is crucial, however, is that much of what we read is not God's word to men and women; rather it is human reflection, for example in search of meaning, as in Ecclesiastes, or wisdom teaching, as in Proverbs, or narrative, of which there is a great deal, and hymnody, the Psalms, which are words of the people addressed to God, and not *vice versa*, and human dialogue about the justice of God, as in Job. In short, much of the contents of the Bible is anything but prophetic-style divine oracles. Rather, a great deal of what we read are the words of human beings, ancient Israelites and early Jewish and gentile Christians, and none of it can be assimilated to the model of divine communication to men and women. We can best put this by saying that the text of Scripture is not God's word spoken to us; rather, it reveals God as the one *about* whom, not *by* whom, various types of literature are written. To regard them all as though they conform to a sort of prophetic ‘template’ is to ignore the very nature of a great deal of the contents of the Bible, and it leads to the idea of Scripture as dictated, as something whispered in someone's ear, as it has been put.

What is required is that we engage in a positive account of the fact that the Bible presents us with revelation not as direct divine speech, not as the direct communication of information by God, but far more as the fruit of an encounter into which the biblical text leads us. Revelation is embodied in and inspired by all these diverse genres—narrative, law, wisdom, hymns, prayers, thanksgiving and praise. That is, the Bible is a *vehicle* or *channel* for the word of God, which comes to us *through* the reading and exposition of Scripture. Through this very diverse literature from many different hands and from widely separated times we are drawn into an encounter, involved in a story, drawn into the companionship of those who worked out their relation to God in teaching and instruction, in praise and celebration and thanksgiving, in reflecting upon life in God's world, in confronting disaster and suffering with faith and hope and trust in God and his promises. We are caught up in hymns of praise and thanksgiving and placed alongside those who worked out their relation to God through formulating laws and stories, in chronicling the history of their people, and in writings born of reflection upon life in God's world, and through confronting disaster and suffering with faith and hope and trust in God and his promises; we hear and are summoned by the

proclamation of the gospel. It is in such ways, when hearing the Scriptures in worship in church, or as we read them in the silence of our own prayers and meditation, that God reaches out to us and touches us, delivers us, consoles us, renews and enlivens our hope, vanquishes any sense of ultimate fear, blesses us as his own, steps out with us on the pilgrimage to which our Lord beckons us and on which he journeys with us. This word is more than the words that we read on the page; the Bible is a *vehicle* or *channel* for the word of God rather than simplistically identical with it. This word is a work of grace within us, a gift of God the Holy Spirit. It is for this gift more fully comprehended and not simply for the written words of Scripture themselves that our thanks are properly due when we read the Scriptures or hear them read. Such a declaration of thanks can be achieved with a little alteration of the present formula, but one which surely expresses more fully the way in which the Bible actually operates in our worship and in our growth in faith: it would be something like: 'For the gift of the word, thanks be to God'. I understand that this formula is already in use in some churches in the diocese. I for one hope that when the time comes for a revision of Common Worship, the revisers will consider it.

Recommended Reading: John Barton, *Making the Christian Bible* (1997); *People of the Book? The Authority of the Bible in Christianity* (1988); *The Bible: The Basics* (2010).